

Reflections on Revelation, Chapters 2 and 3

This block of text is difficult to understand. There's no need here to review all the ways that these two chapters are puzzling. Instead, what does seem to emerge from a careful reading (and re-reading) and reflection on them is as follows:

In the same way that a young man critically evaluates potential brides, the Lord Jesus is critically evaluating those set before Him by His Father who could be His bride. The Book of Revelation ends with a marriage (Ch's 19 and 21). So Jesus here, at the beginning of the Book, is critically evaluating the churches. How are they? (Notice: He doesn't evaluate the Roman Empire rulers, nor the Roman society at large. They are all dead and condemned! His interest and sole concern is His Church.) What He's looking for is perfection! He's constantly examining His people to see how they're maturing. What specifically is He looking for?

First, He's looking at their "deeds." His people are not passive spectators. They are to be active in serving God, living out the righteousness that's been imputed to them, living out in real life, in their lives, the righteousness that characterizes a holy God. Ministering love to each other, doing what's necessary for those in need, for example. Doing evangelism. As priests, interceding for those in need. All that Christ has revealed to be His will for us. Notice 2:4-5: **"You have forsaken your first love . . . Repent and do the things you did at first."** Love is *as love does*. If we love Christ, we'll do as He has revealed we're to be doing.

Second, He's looking to see if they're like He is, an "overcomer." That means making personal sacrifices, even of one's life, out of love for God. It means being obedient to Christ's teachings and expectations, regardless the personal cost, trusting that God will raise us from the dead and reward us in a future existence. Jesus is not interested in those who refuse to be an "overcomer," only those who *are* "overcomers." What is it that must be overcome? Selfishness, or love of self. Fear of death. Lack of trust in God's Word that a resurrection and future existence is coming and refusal to live one's life based on that promise.

Third, He looking for a repudiation of sin in all its ugly expressions and, instead, a continual striving for holiness. Not just sin as wrong-doing, but false teachings and lies and idolatries as well. His people are to identify all that is false and evil *and eschew it*. Not tolerate it, but *hate* it, with passion. If we tolerate wickedness, it's the same as participating in it (note: 2:20-23). Satan has, for centuries, been thoroughly infiltrating the Church with his lies – and not just the local churches but our seminaries and bible colleges and other Christian organizations. We can't plead ignorance: the Word of God has made truth plain so that we can know what's false.

Fourth, He's looking for those who endure. As the years go by, we are expected to be *continually* faithful, continually doing deeds, making sacrifices, suffering loss, obeying God's Word, learning to be godly. No "I once made a decision for Christ, and my destiny is assured." No, that's not enduring faithfulness. God may send hardships, for example, into our life to test us, and we must persevere and remain faithful in spite of them. Faithfulness includes identifying with Jesus although doing that may result in terrible personal loss, even loss of our lives. Beware smugness! It's too easy to be complacent with our "religion" as we know it, supposing we're OK with God. The purpose of these two chapters is so we can know if we're really OK with God or not. And if not, we absolutely must repent.

Fifth, He's examining our motives, our thoughts. Notice 2:23b, **"I am he who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds."** What we do for Christ stems from our will, our desires, our thinking about spiritual matters. Our desires and our thoughts need to be correct, or we'll not be doing what we need to be doing to please Him, to do His revealed will. We also need attitudes of humility, of dependence on Christ, of spiritual self-awareness, of wanting to be like Christ and do as Christ did. We need to steep our minds on the Word of God so that God's thoughts become ours, and thus the Word controls how we live.

I can't adequately emphasize how exceedingly important these two chapters are. That's because the text in these two chapters serves as a warning to us. The Church has been very clearly warned. No one has an excuse, no one can say, "I didn't know. . ." Repentance is *always* an option, but repentance isn't merely sorrow for wrong-doing; it's changing, turning, and doing instead what is right. And no one can say, "Let the professionals do it." The text doesn't allow that option. We're *all* in view.

Instead of setting these two chapters aside because of the difficulties involved in understanding them, we need to very carefully meditate on them, again and again. Why? Because these two precious chapters very clearly state what it is that Christ is looking for, and our desire should be – no, *must* be! – to want to please Him in every way possible.

We need to remember that we're not alone in this, we're not here by ourselves. We're not expected to be super-human people, mega-courageous heroes. If we're in Christ, the supernatural resurrected life of Christ is available to us. The Spirit of Christ has been imparted to us to empower us to live the very life that pleases God. The problem is, we can quench the Spirit. We have to want to yield to the Spirit, we have to choose to yield to the Spirit. We need to be motivated to want to please God. And that's why we must reflect carefully and often on these two chapters.

In Revelation Chapter 19, there's something important that has been totally overlooked, verses 7 and 8: **"For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear. (Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints.)"** Read this again! She "has made *herself* ready." Her gown is *her* "deeds." This is not "works salvation;" this is Scripture! There's no such thing as being a passive Christian. Our problem is, we don't understand grace, and we don't understand what a gift means. God really expects His people to perform, to be transformed, to be sanctified, to bear fruit – *good* fruit – serving Him, to be all that Christ is. And if we love Him, we will do all that. We will do all that God expects of us. Hey! Why else did God reveal His will for us except that He really expects us to do it?

Let's now take a bird's-eye view, a very brief overview of the Book of Revelation. Jesus reveals what *is* (viz, the current state of the Bride), and what *is to come*. And what's to come is, first, terrible judgments upon earth, but out of those horrors will emerge those who obtain salvation because of their faithfulness and testimony in spite of persecution and death. After that, there will be a resurrection and a totally new existence for the Bride and all those who were saved out of the Tribulation.

In other words, this present existence, the world we know and experience, is a period, a temporary, probational period in which God allows violence, hatred, lies and sins of every sort, so that those individuals who, by the changed lives they lead and the change they make in their persons, declare that they really are fit for the holy and good existence that is to come. These individuals manifest in this present, wicked era the kind of life and the kind of person that glorifies God, in anticipation of their existence in the promised future era.

This is really the story of the Bible. The Bible begins with Cain building a city, a godless, wicked city patterned after his own sinful nature. He dishonored God. After the Flood, Nimrod continued that project, building Babylon, a city saturated with idolatry and evil, a city the whole present world is patterned after. In contrast, Abraham sought a city whose builder and maker is God, a heavenly city in an existence that's yet to come, a city we reach by resurrection. But Abraham had to obey God's Word. He honored God. And because he did, he was declared righteous and so received the blessings and benefits on offer. The Son came to make redemption for everyone possible: He did all that's necessary so that those who will to join Abraham on this journey are free to accept the invitation. But just as Abraham had to obey God, so does everyone else.

Reader, if God has called you, He's invited you to participate in this great project. You have been granted astounding privileges, and wonderful blessing is in store for you in the future. But with those come responsibilities. Jesus is our Judge as well as our Savior. So don't ignore God's Word! Don't ignore God's revealed will for us, because whoever does that dishonors God. On such, may God have mercy.